

SEACORM NET - Southeast Asia's coral reef monitoring network

K. Tun and Chou LM

The Coral reefs of Southeast Asia (SEA) are globally the most species-rich and also the most threatened. Covering an area of over 100 000 km², they make up almost 34 per cent of the world's total coral reef area. They are home to more species of hard corals than any other region - 75 per cent of the 800 odd reef-building coral species occur in the region. This richness has been both a blessing and a curse to the reefs. The rich bounty of reef resources has sustained the livelihoods of generations of coastal communities. However, unregulated over-exploitation and destructive fishing over the past few decades has resulted in unprecedented damage and widespread degradation, posing a threat to coastal communities that are heavily dependent on reef resources. Despite this widespread damage, the associated economic benefits remain substantial – their importance to food security, employment, tourism, pharmaceutical research, and shoreline protection cannot be over-emphasized. The value of the region's sustainable coral reef fisheries alone is estimated at US\$ 2.4 billion annually (Burke et al. 2002).

Since the mid-1980s, increased awareness of reef degradation has led to a growing realization that monitoring and management play a critical role in preventing further and perhaps irreversible loss in reef biodiversity and productivity. Numerous efforts to assess the status and arrest the decline have been initiated in recent decades at the local, national and regional scales. The

level of expertise in reef monitoring and management varies among countries and in each country it is influenced by the individual needs of the country, availability of funding, capacity to undertake research and monitoring, and political willingness to implement management measures.

A recent positive development is the adoption of specific regulations and establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Most countries have also initiated monitoring programs to regularly and systematically document reef status (both inside and outside MPAs). Despite the increasing data generated by these programs, there is insufficient cross-country coordination and information sharing. This is not due to a lack of willingness to collaborate but because of the lack of a permanent and structured mechanism to facilitate cooperation and coordination. Over the last two decades, numerous regional initiatives, starting with the ASEAN-Australia Living Coastal Resources (LCR) Project, have brought reef scientists together and established a strong network among them. However, the network remains an informal arrangement and coordination is still on a voluntary basis.

The year 2004 marks a new chapter for coral reef monitoring in SEA. With the appointment of a SEA regional coordinator for the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN) in February, the country coordinators have come together and supported the establishment of a

formal regional network of coral reef monitoring groups. The region's scientists recognize the need to work together and to spearhead regional initiatives that will allow for better integration of information and resources. Named SEACORM Net (Southeast Asia Coral Reef Monitoring Network), the group intends to establish a strong working relationship between member countries, share information and lessons learnt, inform and update each other on research and monitoring activities in each country, and provide a mechanism for cross-country assistance and collaboration.

The first major initiative of SEACORM Net was to take a unified approach at the 10th International Coral Reef Symposium (ICRS) held in Okinawa in June 2004. To enable more efficient networking between member countries, SEACORM Net has also established a website using the Windows SharePoint Services platform, to enable more efficient information sharing and collaboration.

Currently, SEACORM Net has members from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. For further information about SEACORM Net, please contact Karenne Tun (k.tun@cgiar.org)

Reference

Burke, L., E. Selig and M. Spalding. 2002. Reefs at Risk in Southeast Asia. World Resources Institute.